



Maurizio Ferraris, *Università degli Studi di Torino*
Enrico Terrone, *Università degli Studi di Torino*

Automatic Sweethearts Without Names: The Place of Films in the World of Art¹

In a 1908 article entitled “The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstanders”, William James proposed the following thought experiment:

I thought of what I called an ‘automatic sweetheart,’ meaning a soulless body which should be absolutely indistinguishable from a spiritually animated maiden [...] Would any one regard her as a full equivalent? Certainly not, and why? Because, framed as we are, our egoism craves above all things inward sympathy and recognition, love and admiration. The outward treatment is valued mainly as an expression, as a manifestation of the accompanying consciousness believed in.²

The experiment shows that when interacting with another person we are not satisfied with them looking like a person: we want them to really be a person. However, there is a category of objects with which we normally interact being content with the fact that they resemble people, though clearly not being such. These objects are works of art.

The theory of the work of art as an “automatic sweetheart”³ aims to treat the work of art as a social object while preserving its aesthetic peculiarities. These two complementary objectives are pursued through the articulation of two concepts: one begins by defining a social object as a social act (i.e. involving at least two agents) that is inscribed (i.e. recorded on a tangible medium, or simply in people’s minds); then the final step is to define a work of art as a social object that has a peculiar property – being an automatic sweetheart, that is, *an object pretending to be a subject, a thing pretending to be a person*. The (at least two) people involved in the social act, in this case, are the artist and the appreciator. The structure of the automatic sweetheart clarifies the relationship between these two agents: the artist creates the automatic sweetheart as if it were a person and the appreciator experiences it as if it were a person.

*

The obvious objection that a film or a symphony don’t look at all like a person allows us to make a decisive clarification. The theory does not state that works of art should look like people in the sense of being anthropomorphic. The idea is rather that usually people are the main sources of mental attitudes – such as emotions and feelings – that are also aroused by works of art.

Also, a work of art pretends to be a person in the sense that it appears to be equipped with its own individuality; the work is presented as an individual to which we are inclined to attribute not only material properties (small, colored...) but also mental ones (intelligent, brilliant, melancholic, passionate). According to Peter F.



Strawson, people are the paradigmatic case of entities that we can describe using both predicates designating material properties (M-predicates) and predicates designating personal or mental properties (P-predicates).⁴ Arthur C. Danto shows that a similar duality of predicates is also found in the case of works of art:

The relationship between the work and its material substrate is as intricate as that between mind and body. Or, following P. F. Strawson, with his distinction between P-predicates and M-predicates, it is as if there were properties of the work exemplifying what we may call W-predicates and properties of the mere things that are visually indiscernible from the work, exemplifying what we may call O-predicates, where there is the task, which may vary from item to item in an arrayed example, of determining which O-predicates are also W-predicates and which are not. [...] The distinction between artworks and mere real things reappears as a distinction between the language used to describe works and the language of mere things.⁵

We argue that to appreciate a work of art means to interact with an individual that could be called a quasi-person, or an automatic sweetheart: though it has only material properties, it appears to us as if it also had mental properties. Moreover, like people, works of art often have a name (their title) and a date of birth (the time of their creation). Strawson himself, in his only essay on aesthetics (1966), highlights the unique “individuality of the work of art”, which distinguishes it from other families of objects.⁶ To this end, Strawson endorses the claims of two “writers on aesthetics”: Stuart Hampshire, for whom “[The] purpose [of the critic] is to lead people to look at precisely this unique object, not to see the object as one of a kind, but as individual and unrepeatable”; and Margaret Macdonald, for whom “Every work of art is unique and in the last resort, perhaps, can be judged by no standard but its own”.⁷

*

However, some art appreciators are not satisfied with the works of art being *like* people; they want them to really *be* people. To achieve this aim, the work of art must be provided with extra soul, which is the soul of its author. In so doing, not only does the work of art seem like a person, but it *is* a person, in the sense that it becomes inseparable from the author who created it, from whom the work thus receives a supplement of soul. The cult of the author in the appreciation of art (for instance, the so-called *politique des auteurs* in cinema), seems to respond precisely to this dissatisfaction with the artwork being *like* a person – it is required to *be* a person instead. However this attitude towards art is likely to have a misleading effect on aesthetic appreciation. The problem is that, according to the author’s cult, the value attributed to a work no longer depends on what makes it such – its ability to be like a person – and is instead made to depend on its being a person, that is, its being at one with the author who created it.

In fact, the principle that anything can be a work of art – one of the fundamental principles of contemporary art, ever since Duchamp – has as its indispensable corollary the intentional act of an author who gives the ordinary object an extra soul. A more prosaic way of formulating this fundamental principle lies in the injunction: “read the catalog”. If the work does not speak to you, it’s not its fault (it is not that it fails to be like a person, to function as an automatic sweetheart): the fault is yours because you do not understand (you, the viewer, cannot grasp the soul that gives it life, the soul of the artist). Reading the catalog is a way to learn to recognize the soul that the artist has breathed into the work.

*

The theory of the automatic sweetheart is opposed to this way to approach art, which mainly applies to contemporary art but is also widely present in more popular arts such as cinema, especially in the cultural phenomenon known as cinephilia. What is being asked of a work of art as an automatic sweetheart is primarily to function in itself, on its own, arousing emotions and thoughts regardless of the knowledge that the viewer might have about

the author of the work. In ordinary experience, we meet people and we appreciate and judge them for *how they behave*, not for their noble birth; similarly, in artistic experience, we meet a work of art, i.e. an automatic sweetheart, and we appreciate and judge it for how it works, that is, for *how it seems to behave*.

The theory of the automatic sweetheart, in this respect, points out the possibility of a direct relationship with works of art, rather than mediated by the personality of the author. Here is the link with the idea of *A History of Cinema Without Names*: “nameless”, here, means above all “authorless”. The primary interest is no longer given to the wires that move the puppet, and even less to the hand that pulls the wires; attention turns instead to the puppet itself, or the automatic sweetheart, regardless of the wires and hands that move it.

*

At this point, one should note that the theory of the automatic sweetheart is admittedly an incomplete theory of art. An automatic sweetheart is only a sufficient condition, not a necessary condition, to be a work of art. Namely, all works of art are automatic sweethearts, but there are also things that are automatic sweethearts without being works of art; for example, dolls, posters, Christmas trees, a security blanket, Winnicott’s transactional objects, Christopher Lambert’s speaking keychain in Marco Ferreri’s *I love you* (1986).⁸

The necessary condition that distinguishes works of art from other automatic sweethearts is to be found precisely in the importance of information on the history of the work’s creation, in order to achieve an appropriate appreciation of the work itself. If one wants to properly appreciate and evaluate a work of art, one should not just treat it *as if it were a person*, but one must also know *which real person* has made it – in which historical context, within which cultural practice. The primary motivations that underlie the author’s cult are not, therefore, totally unfounded; indeed, they individuate the additional component that allows one to narrow down the works of art within the wider set of automatic sweethearts.

*

The plurality of components of the artwork has been analyzed by Richard Wollheim in the specific case of pictures. Wollheim distinguishes three different levels of appreciation in the experience of a picture: 1) the “Recognitional Fold”, which deals with recognizable scenes in the picture; 2) the “Configurational Fold”, which concerns the material vehicle of the picture and the distribution of colored marks on its surface; 3) The “Standard of Correctness” which regards the history of the picture’s making and the intentions of the artist who created it.⁹

The Configurational Fold is the joint that connects the Recognitional Fold to the Standard of Correctness: from the experience of the scenes depicted by an picture (Recognitional Fold), we can go back to the recognition of the author’s intentions (Standard of Correctness) by means of the perceptual experience of the picture’s surface as an object configured by the author (Configurational Fold). This is because the artist, according to his intentions (Standard of Correctness), configured the perceptible picture area (Configurational Fold) by which we recognize the depicted scenes (Recognitional Fold). Starting from this characterization, Wollheim argues that the proper appreciation of the picture consists in retracing the process of its creation; in this regard, he speaks of “criticism as retrieval”, stating that “the task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process”.¹⁰

*

Taking Wollheim’s “criticism as retrieval” to its extreme consequences, the cult of the author focuses on the Standard of Correctness (what the artist “meant”) treating the Configurational Fold (the experience of what the artist made) as the main object of attention, while relegating the Recognitional Fold (the experience

produced by the artwork itself) to a secondary role. The cult of the author, therefore, has the limit of underestimating the importance of the Recognitional Fold, placing too much emphasis on the Configurational Fold and on the Standards of Correctness.

Yet, as Wollheim himself makes very clear, the Standard of Correctness is an essential component of the picture: the cult of the author, to a certain extent, has a *raison d'être*. The work of art is an automatic sweetheart of which we also want to know the history of creation; a puppet of which we also want to see the wires, and even the puppeteer that moves them.

But the fact remains that the appreciation of the work of art as an automatic sweetheart, as a seemingly autonomous puppet, is a crucial moment of the aesthetic experience. And it is this aesthetic moment that is likely to be overshadowed by a conception of art focused on the author. There is a direct relationship with the work as an apparently autonomous individual, as an automatic sweetheart, which is preliminary to any appreciation of the work seen as the creation of a real person – the author, the artist. One should treat the work as if it were self-generated, and as if it were able to generate a number of experiences on its own: this is the main precept that follows from the theory of the work of art as an automatic sweetheart. In the particular case of cinema, this amounts to treating a film as a peculiar entity providing us with an experiential route through an objective world: namely, the world of the story being told.

In this sense, the account of the film as an automatic sweetheart sharply differs from two important tendencies in the contemporary debate about cinema, namely, *intentionalism* and *illusionism*. According to *intentionalism*, recognizing the intentions of the filmmaker (either the real one, just as in cult of the author, or at least an implicit one) plays a fundamental role in our experience of films. According to *illusionism*, instead, our experience of fiction films has strong analogies with our embodied experience of the real world. On the one hand, intentionalism mainly draws on Gricean theories of communication¹¹ and on language-based cognitive science.¹² On the other hand, illusionism mainly draws on perception-based cognitive science¹³ and on neuroscience.¹⁴ Borrowing Wollheim's terminology, the focus on intentionalism is on the Configurational Fold and (through the "retrieval process") on the Standard of Correctness, whereas the focus of illusionism is on the Recognitional Fold understood as providing the spectator with an embodied perceptual access to the world depicted by the film, as if she had her own place in this very world.

Our account sharply differs from intentionalism since we understand the film as an object that, at a basic level of appreciation, can be enjoyed as a generator of experiences, namely an automatic sweetheart, without the need to recognize the filmmaker's intentions. The recognition of intentions (through the Configurational Fold and the Standard of Correctness) allows us to add layers of appreciation and to enrich our experience of a film, but such an enrichment relies on a basic layer of appreciation in which we just treat the film as an automatic sweetheart independently of the filmmaker's intentions.

Still, our account also differs from illusionism since we do not treat the film as eliciting an embodied perceptual experience of the world depicted that is of the same kind as the ordinary perception of the actual world. Rather, according to our account, the spectator's experience basically concerns the film itself as an automatic sweetheart that supplies a *sui generis* disembodied perceptual experience of the world depicted. The film as an automatic sweetheart offers us a perceptual gift that is not normally available in our everyday experience. As explained, treating the film as an automatic sweetheart does not prevent one from being also interested in the author and the context of production. The two dimensions of appreciation are complementary. First one appreciates the work as automatic sweetheart, then you look into the wires and invisible hands moving her, and finally you go back to treating her as if she were alive: aesthetic judgment is formed in this coming and going. Treating the work as an automatic sweetheart does not exhaust its appreciation, but is an indispensable key stage of the process.

*

In cultural practices there is often a gap between two typical forms of appreciation: that "of the masses", which treat works primarily as automatic sweethearts, and that "of the experts", who treat the works as

historical products of the artists who authored them. The point is that both of these modes of appreciation are limited. Therefore, the theory of the automatic sweetheart should not be confused with a reevaluation of the mass-spectator understood as a noble savage that is not affected by cultural prejudices. On the other hand, the theory of the automatic sweetheart is also opposed to idealizing expert knowledge as a paradigm of the attitude that everyone should have towards artworks. More modestly, the theory of the automatic sweetheart tries to show that both these dimensions – the *naïveté* of the masses, the knowledge of the experts – play a key role in the appreciation of a work of art, as they both establish the identity of the work itself.

The ability to pretend to be a person identifies the *ontological genus* of works of art: that of automatic sweethearts. The essential link to the history of production and the author's creative activity identifies the *specific difference* of the artwork in relation to other automatic sweethearts. Therefore it is appropriate to treat a work of art as an automatic sweetheart because of the genus to which it belongs, but it is equally appropriate to take interest in the history of creation of the work because of its specific difference.

*

While both these aspects – automatic sweetheart and artist's creation – are essential to the understanding of the work of art, we believe that in this historic phase the first aspect is usually underestimated compared to the second. This is what motivates us to interpret the project of *A History of Cinema Without Names* in terms of a history of films understood as automatic sweethearts.

Filmmaking and contemporary art have established themselves around the same period, roughly a century ago: Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* dates 1915, and Duchamp's *Fountain* 1917. Yet their working mechanism seems profoundly different. The more filmmaking highlights the work as an automatic sweetheart, the more contemporary art enhances the work as the artist's emanation. Duchamp shows that any object can be a work of art, even a latrine, as long as the artist applies his signature, his name, to it. Griffith instead gives its audience a film as such capable of generating emotions, by virtue of the sheer force of its pictures, regardless of the author's name.

*

On closer inspection, however, the divide is not as clear as we have presented it so far. A film is also the result of the creative acts of an author, and a work of contemporary art is also an automatic sweetheart. In particular, having now acquired legitimacy as an art form and not just as a form of entertainment, cinema recognizes directors as authors of films, and information about how a film was made imposes itself as an essential requirement for a proper appreciation of that film.

However, cinema has an inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the traditional fine arts and their designated heir, contemporary art. This inferiority complex seems due to what Benjamin defines "aura".¹⁵ In the theoretical perspective of the automatic sweetheart we interpret the aura as the extra soul that the artist gives the work. The aura is to the artwork what the soul is to the body. That is, a work of art furnished with aura does not count as the disappointing automatic sweetheart of James's thought experiment; instead it counts as a real person. That being the case, the loss of aura that characterizes cinema is not just about technical reproducibility, but especially about the ability to produce works – films – that may also function as automatic sweethearts, freed from the need of a supplement of soul, of an aura. On the other hand contemporary art brings the idea of an aura to its extreme consequences, emphasizing the ability of artistic creation to transfigure the most miserable objects – Duchamp's latrine, Manzoni's faeces – by infusing aura into them.

*

In a thought experiment concerning the nature of the work of art, Arthur Danto proposes to consider a curious character, unwilling to treat certain objects displayed in contemporary art museums as works of art: “Imagine, now, a certain Testadura – a plain speaker and noted philistine – who is not aware that these are art, and who takes them to be reality simple and pure”.¹⁶

Danto’s point is that Testadura lacks a proper theory of art, so he merely focuses on the observable properties of the works, without recognizing the hidden, unobservable ones: those related to the history of the work’s creation, or to what we have defined as its aura – the extra soul that the artist has given it. At the contemporary art museum, Testadura only sees what is before him, failing to understand that it is a work of art and not an ordinary object. Seeing the beds exposed by Rauschenberg or Oldenburg, Testadura is tempted to lie down on them, and one can easily guess what would have occurred had he seen Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Yet Testadura would not have such problems if he went to a theater to watch a movie. This is because films present themselves as automatic sweethearts, and can be enjoyed without the need to grasp their aura.

*

This difference between filmmaking and contemporary art can be synthesized by means of a historical narrative. Until the nineteenth century, art appeared as a unitary phenomenon, such that the perceived appearance of the work and information about the history of its creation – in short, the automatic sweetheart on one side and the aura on the other – equally contributed to its appreciation. In the twentieth century, with the rise of cinema (and more generally of mass art)¹⁷ and readymade art (and more generally of contemporary art), the unity of the artistic phenomenon split. On the one hand, cinema appears to be capable of offering automatic sweethearts without aura. On the other, contemporary art offers items, such as readymades, which are unable to function on their own as automatic sweethearts, and therefore require additional knowledge on the history of their creation, that is, the soul that the artist has breathed into them – the aura.

Until the nineteenth century, despite his limitations, Testadura could appreciate the works of art without any particular difficulty, and distinguish them from ordinary objects that clearly are not works of art. At most one could object to Testadura that his appreciation wasn’t very deep, limited to observable qualities without taking into account the history of the work’s creation; however, it could not be denied that Testadura’s attitude towards the work of art was a genuine aesthetic appreciation. In the twentieth century, though, the art world was split in two: on one side the movie theater that seems made for Testadura, on the other the contemporary art museum where Testadura gets lost in awkward misunderstanding.

It is noteworthy that the status of “work of art” has often been challenged both in the case of filmmaking and in that of readymade art, but for different reasons. In the case of films, the problem is the lack of aura; in the case of readymade art, the problem is that there is nothing but the aura. Symmetrically, one could say that in the case of readymade art the problem is that the automatic sweetheart seems to be missing, while in the case of films it seems to be all there is. In short, the film pleases Testadura too much to be a work of art, while the readymades don’t please him enough.

In this paper we have tried to show that Testadura is not entirely in the wrong. There is a crucial dimension of aesthetic appreciation that is based on Testadura’s naivety, and that means treating the work of art as something that looks like a person, as a generator of experiences, emotions and feelings – like an automatic sweetheart. In filmmaking this dimension is particularly prominent. *A History of Cinema without Names* can finally give it the importance it deserves.

Notes

- ¹ Both authors made equal contributions to the project of this essay. Maurizio Ferraris directly wrote the first five sections, while Enrico Terrone wrote the last six sections. The essay has been translated from Italian to English by Sarah De Sanctis.
- ² William James. "The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstanders", in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, January 1908, p. 5.
- ³ Maurizio Ferraris, *La fidanzata automatica*, Bompiani, Milano 2007.
- ⁴ P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*, Methuen, London 1959.
- ⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration Of The Commonplace: A Philosophy Of Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 104.
- ⁶ P. F. Strawson, "Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art", in *The Oxford Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1966 pp. 5-13; reprinted in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, Methuen, London 1974, pp. 178-188.
- ⁷ quoted in *Idem*, p. 201
- ⁸ Enrico Terrone, "Fidanzate in esubero. L'opera d'arte come oggetto meta sociale", in *Rivista di estetica*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2008, pp. 274-278.
- ⁹ Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1980 and Id., "On Pictorial Representation", *The Journal Of Aesthetics And Art Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 3, Summer 1998, pp. 217-226.
- ¹⁰ Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, cit., p. 185.
- ¹¹ Stefano Donati, *Cinema e conversazione: l'interpretazione del film narrativo*, Prospettiva, Civitavecchia 2006 and Beatrice Sasha Kobow, *See What I Mean. Understanding Films as Communicative Actions*, Mentis Verlag, Paderborn 2008.
- ¹² Alessandro Pignocchi, *Pourquoi aime-t-on un film ? Quand les sciences cognitives discutent des goûts et des couleurs*, Odile Jacob, Paris 2015.
- ¹³ Joseph D. Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1996.
- ¹⁴ Vittorio Gallese, Michele Guerra, *Lo schermo empatico. Cinema e neuroscienze*, Cortina, Milano 2015.
- ¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* in Id., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levi, Harvard University Press, Boston 2008, pp. 19-55.
- ¹⁶ Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld", in *The Journal Of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19, October 1964, p. 575.
- ¹⁷ Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy Of Mass Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998.